

MEETING OF FRI., MARCH 6, 2015

Written Testimony of Maryland M. Grier
Sisters' Journey
American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story with you today. I recognize that you have to make tough decisions about the budget, so I hope that my story will enlighten and impassion you as to the importance and value of the state's Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program. This program has made an enormous impact on saving the lives of low-income, uninsured and underinsured women diagnosed with breast and cervical cancer.

My name is Maryland M. Grier, I am a 29-year African-American breast cancer survivor, affiliated with Sisters Journey, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that seeks to aid and support women diagnosed with and who have survived breast cancer, and based in New Haven.

I am sharing my story today on behalf of the hundreds of women of color in Connecticut who may not be aware that they are potentially at risk of being diagnosed with breast cancer; and more importantly, that the governor has proposed a \$199,877 cut that would harm a program that could save their lives. These women are often hidden in communities with limited access to information, strong cultural beliefs and practices, and other barriers that often prevent them from engaging with the mainstream community, let alone medical providers.

The proven success of this early detection program demands funding levels that will provide access to these services for all eligible women. Maintaining state funding of \$2.2 million annually for breast and cervical cancer screenings for low income, uninsured or underinsured women through the program is vital so that no woman is denied these life-saving services.

This is my story:

I am one of the fortunate and blessed ones to have had access to early detection.... Had I not, I might not be here today to share my story.

The year was 1986. I was in my twenties, living in Washington, DC and diagnosed with breast cancer....

One day, while showering, I felt a very small lump on my left breast, but didn't think much of it. I told my doctor about the lump during my next visit. He said, "You're too young, I'm sure it's nothing – let's just watch it for a few months." I didn't really think much of his response because at that time there was very little coverage in the news about breast cancer...and definitely not a topic of discussion in my family. Three months later, I had a biopsy and surgery to remove the lump. I learned that the lump had grown and spread to 10 of my lymph nodes and that I would need a radical mastectomy, six months of chemotherapy, a tissue expander, and another surgery to insert the implant.

Everything happened so quickly, it felt surreal. No one in my family had ever discussed 'cancer' nor was I aware that anyone had ever been diagnosed with cancer. It was much later in my adult life that I learned that my father, a non-smoker, died of throat cancer when he was just 34 and I was only 13. I was blessed to have had a very strong support network of family, friends, co-workers and a 'buddy'

assigned to me by the American Cancer Society. The buddy assigned to me also had been diagnosed with breast cancer in her twenties. I was also encouraged to join a support group. I recall looking around the room and realizing that I was the youngest person in the support group. When you're young, you don't think about cancer, or getting health insurance necessarily unless it's offered through your employer.

If I had access to an early detection that would have put emphasis on the initial discovery of my lump, I might have been able to avoid all of these issues that happened three months later. By the way, I was still fortunate because I survived. And in many cases, women don't survive, especially women of color. That highlights the importance of an early detection program.

After treatment and the final surgery, I resumed my normal life and did not talk about breast cancer for many years. I was told by my family that I should keep my 'business' to myself and to always walk with my head held high, despite my circumstances.

Fast forward almost five years and I am now living in Connecticut..... still not talking about my breast cancer experience with anyone until I met a wonderful woman at church who had been recently diagnosed with breast cancer. Still somewhat uncomfortable, I finally went to her to share my experience. We decided to do something to raise awareness about breast cancer among African American women. We organized a panel of physicians to discuss the issues and an event entitled: "Woman, Hold Your Head Up! I became more comfortable talking publicly about my experience, and joined other women in Connecticut to raise awareness about breast cancer; served as a "buddy" to newly-diagnosed patients in the Hartford area and participated in breast cancer walks and other events.

While I am aware that the Affordable Care Act provides women with greater access to preventative cancer screenings and treatment, gaps still remain for women who continue to be uninsured or underinsured due to affordability, literacy, and language related barriers. It is estimated that 22,468 Connecticut women will continue to lack access to cervical cancer screenings, and 10,628 women will lack access to breast cancer screenings. Maintaining funding of \$2.2 million annually for the program will preserve a critical safety net for thousands of Connecticut women, who will continue to lack access to essential screening, diagnostic, and treatment services.

If my impassioned plea does not move you, here are some facts:

- African American women are at risk of developing breast cancer at a younger age and their cancers are more biologically aggressive. And, of African American women who develop breast cancer, 35 percent are under the age of 50, according to Dr. Christine Zarfos in a recent article in the Connecticut Health Investigative Team news outlet.
- Black women under the age of 35 have more than twice the incidence of invasive breast cancer and are three times more likely to die of the disease than young white women,

Please make the right, but tough decision to continue funding Connecticut's Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program and do not ignore the 10,628 Connecticut residents who will lack access to breast cancer screenings because they are hidden in communities with no information or access to early detection.